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FOR NEA/APR:AMACDONALD, NEA/PPD

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [YM](#)
SUBJECT: SOUTHERN UNREST CASTS A SHADOW OVER PREPARATIONS
FOR YEMEN'S UNITY DAY

REF: A. SANAA 898
[1](#)B. SANAA 833

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. Yemen approaches the 19th anniversary of its unification facing challenges from the south that some observers have characterized as unprecedented since the civil war in 1994. Both the ROYG and the southern independence movement are likely to use this week's observance of Unity Day as an occasion to demonstrate their respective resolve; violent demonstrations in the south cannot be discounted, although senior ROYG officials insist security forces will maintain control and it appears likely this will be the case. Post recommends that the Department issue a statement early this week urging restraint by both parties and the initiation of serious and sustained dialogue in order to restore trust between the government in Sana'a and the people of the south. Suggested language appears in paragraph 9. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) Reftels note the increasingly secessionist rhetoric employed by the Southern Movement, reflecting a growing insistence that a unified Yemen is no longer a viable option. While it is unclear to what extent this view is broadly held by the general southern population, there is no doubt that the ranks of those committed to dissolving Yemen's union are growing. Evidence also points to the integration of more violent elements into the movement, generating concern that it is entering a more militant, confrontational phase.

[1](#)3. (C) All of this provides a somewhat unsettling backdrop for this week's observance of the 19th anniversary of Yemen's 1990 unification. Led by President Saleh, the ROYG has recently engaged in a flurry of activity aimed at demonstrating the central government's commitment to development in the south, and at the same time, its intention to minimize public manifestations of anti-unity sentiment. Speaking to southern tribal leaders on May 17, Saleh asserted that the ROYG is moving to amend the Constitution to permit greater decentralization of authority in the country. Vice President Abdurabu Mansour Hadi and Prime Minister Ali Mujawar have been sent south to inaugurate development projects in southern governorates valued at 21 billion Yemeni rials (USD 105 million) to address complaints that the ROYG ignores southern development needs. Saleh also sent former Minister of Local Affairs AbdulKadir al-Hilal to head a committee to address concerns in the Radfan area of the restive Dhale governorate.

[1](#)4. (C) Meanwhile, the ROYG crackdown on press freedom continues (Ref B), preventing the publishing of a number of independent newspapers. The purported justification of this action was to prevent those papers from printing "seditious" and "inflammatory" stories designed to foment anti-ROYG sentiment. A secondary benefit derived by the ROYG is that, by shutting down these outlets, the central government deprives the Southern Movement of a tool used to publicize

and organize demonstrations. Finally, the ROYG has chosen to mark Unity Day with the "largest ever" military parade in Sana'a, designed as a very clear display of its military capability.

WHAT WE EXPECT TO HAPPEN

15. (C) Some elements in the Southern Movement have indicated to us that they will take advantage of Unity Day to make a public statement of their intentions to seek the dissolution of Yemen's unity.

16. (C) Post expects demonstrations across southern Yemen around May 22. (Note: Because Unity Day falls on a Friday, the Muslim holy day, the ROYG is likely to hold its official observance on Thursday; we expect southern protest demonstrations to follow suit. End Note.) Yemen security forces will contain these demonstrations, using the proven methods of limiting movement to population centers and likely gathering places. A ROYG program of arresting protest organizers prior to May 21 will also act to reduce the effectiveness of the demonstrations. Tight ROYG controls will prevent significant press coverage of demonstrations within the country but will likely be less successful in international fora, particularly with difficult-to-control internet sources.

17. (C) In traditional hotspots in Lahj, Dhale and Abyan, demonstrations may lead to violence as radicals attempt to provoke a violent response from security forces, or security forces overreact to non-violent but large-scale protests. If demonstrations turn violent or overtly call for secession,

security forces will intervene forcefully. In Sana'a, the large military presence related to Unity Day celebrations will likely deter any major anti-unity demonstrations. If such demonstrations occur, the ROYG will have more than adequate resources immediately available to quell them.

18. (C) As always, there is a chance that al-Qaeda or the rebellious al-Houthi movement in Sa'ada may take advantage of the ROYG's preoccupation with the southern issue to stage an attack or otherwise escalate their confrontations with the ROYG. Post, however, has no specific information indicating that this will be the case.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

19. (C) The international community's recent expressions of support for Yemen's unity, and calls for real dialogue to address legitimate grievances, led by Post's May 3 public statement on the topic, have gone some distance to calm ROYG concerns. Similarly, a public statement from the Department early this week will present another opportunity for the USG to further promote stability in Yemen in the short term. We propose the following language for use by the Department spokesman:

Begin Text of Proposed Statement

On May 22, Yemen marks the 19th anniversary of its unification. It does so against a backdrop of civil unrest in the south and calls for southern independence. The United States wishes to reiterate its support for a stable, unified, and democratic Yemen. We urge all parties to refrain from acts of violence and to initiate immediately a serious and sustained dialogue to identify and address the legitimate grievances that fuel southern disenfranchisement.

The United States believes that Yemen's unity depends on its ability to guarantee every citizen equal treatment under the law, and the opportunity to participate fully in the political and economic life of the nation. The United States believes that the social and political problems confronting Yemen can be solved without violence or provocation.

In this regard, we express our concern regarding measures taken recently by the Government of the Republic of Yemen to close or otherwise impede the operation of several independent newspapers. A free press is a fundamental principle of democratic societies. The United States urges the Republic of Yemen Government to demonstrate its support for freedom of expression and permit Yemen's independent media to perform its important function in an unfettered and responsible manner.

End Text

COMMENT

¶10. (C) For all the suggestions that Unity Day 2009 will be a defining moment in Yemen's still fledgling effort to create a coherent nation, it is just as likely that what occurs this week will be the preliminary steps in a longer campaign by those who seek to dissolve the union and not the cathartic experience some seem to expect. Knowing the world is watching, the ROYG can be expected to take all steps necessary to demonstrate its commitment to preserving Yemen's unity; for its part, the Southern Movement may use this demonstration of ROYG resolve to its advantage, provoking security forces into a disproportionate response in an effort to create international sympathy for its cause. Thus, while some violence is likely, we expect neither side to emerge from this moment with any particular advantage over the other. In this atmosphere, a reassertion of U.S. support for a unified Yemen can have a salutary effect, although we must at the same time insist that unity will be viable only if the central government takes meaningful steps to address the corruption and neglect that have brought long-simmering southern resentment to a boil. END COMMENT.

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